

## PELAGIUS

### Synod Of Lydda To Investigate Pelagius' Teachings, 415 AD

Reconstructed By Rev. Daniel R. Jennings, MA

**Synopsis:** *In 415 a second ecclesiastical trial was held against Pelagius, this time being instigated by two deposed Western bishops, Heros of Arles and Lazarus of Aix. The records are lost with only fragments of it remaining and what follows was taken from Augustine of Hippo's "On The Proceedings Of Pelagius". The Synod was presided over by Eulogius, bishop of Caesarea and metropolitan and was attended by thirteen other bishops: John of Jerusalem, Ammonianus, Eutonium, two Porphyrys, Fidus, Zomnus, Zoboennus, Nymphidius, Chromatius, Jovinus, Eleutherius, and Clematius. The two accusers were absent from the hearing owing to the illness of one of them, but a document was handed in containing the principal charges. In the end Pelagius was acknowledged as being Orthodox in doctrine and in full communion with the church.*

**Synod:** [Pelagius writes in a certain book of his that] 'No man can be without sin unless he has acquired a knowledge of the law.'

**Synod:** Did you, Pelagius, express yourself thus?

**Pelagius:** I certainly used the words, but not in the sense in which they understand them. I did not say that a man is unable to sin who has acquired a knowledge of the law; but that he is by the knowledge of the law assisted towards not sinning, even as it is written, 'He hath given them a law for help'.

**Synod:** The words which have been spoken by Pelagius are not different from the Church.

**Synod:** Let another section be read. [It was then read from his book that] 'all men are ruled by their own will.'

**Pelagius:** This I stated in the interest of free will. God is its helper whenever it chooses good; man, however, when sinning is himself in fault, as under the direction of a free will.

**Synod:** Nor again is this opposed to the doctrine of the Church.

**Synod:** [Pelagius has written in his book that] 'In the day of judgment no forbearance will be shown to the ungodly and the sinners, but they will be consumed in eternal fires.'  
[To this Synod this statement seems to be worded in such a way as to imply that all sinners whatever were to be punished with an eternal punishment, without excepting even those who hold Christ as their foundation, although 'they build thereupon wood, hay, stubble,' concerning whom the apostle writes: 'If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he shall himself be saved, yet so as by fire.']

**Pelagius:** I made this assertion in accordance with the Gospel, in which it is written

concerning sinners, 'These shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.' [He] who believes differently is an Origenist.

**Synod:** [What you are saying then is] not opposed to the Church.

**Synod:** [Pelagius has written in his book that] 'evil does not enter our thoughts [if we are Christians].'

**Pelagius:** We made no such statement. What we did say was, that 'the Christian ought to be careful not to have evil thoughts.'

**Synod:** [What you are saying then is not opposed to the teachings of the Church.]

**Synod:** [Pelagius has written in his book that] 'The kingdom of heaven was promised even in the Old Testament.'

**Pelagius:** This can be proved by the Scriptures: but heretics, in order to disparage the Old Testament, deny this. I, however, simply followed the authority of the Scriptures when I said this; for in the prophet Daniel it is written: 'The saints shall receive the kingdom of the Most High.'

**Synod:** Neither is this opposed to the Church's faith.

**Synod:** [Pelagius has written in his book that] 'A man is able, if he likes, to be without sin' [and in a letter to a certain widow he wrote flatteringly that] 'In thee piety may find a dwelling-place, such as she finds nowhere else; in thee righteousness, though a stranger, can find a home; truth, which no one any longer recognizes, can discover an abode and a friend in thee; and the law of God, which almost everybody despises, may be honoured by thee alone.' [Elsewhere in this same letter he wrote] 'O how happy and blessed art thou, when that righteousness which we must believe to flourish only in heaven has found a shelter on earth only in thy heart!' [In another work addressed to this same woman Pelagius, after reciting the Lord's prayer and then proceeding to teach her in what manner saints ought to pray, says] 'He worthily raises his hands to God, and with a good conscience does he pour out his prayer, who is able to say, "Thou, O Lord, knowest how holy, and harmless, and pure from all injury and iniquity and violence, are the hands which I stretch out to Thee; how righteous, and pure, and free from all deceit, are the lips with which I offer to Thee my supplication, that Thou wouldst have mercy upon me."'"]

**Pelagius:** We asserted that a man could be without sin, and could keep God's commandments if he wished; for this capacity has been given to him by God. But we never said that any man could be found who at no time whatever, from infancy to old age, had committed sin: but that if any person were converted from his sins, he could by his own labour and God's grace be without sin; and yet not even thus would he be incapable of change ever afterwards. As for the other statements which they have made against us, they are not to be found in our books, nor have we at any time said such

things.

**Synod:** You have denied having ever written such words; are you therefore ready to anathematize those who do hold these opinions?

**Pelagius:** I anathematize them as fools, not as heretics, for there is no dogma.

**Synod:** Since now Pelagius has with his own mouth anathematized this vague statement as foolish verbiage, justly declaring in his reply, 'That a man is able with God's assistance and grace to be without sin,' let him now proceed to answer the other heads of accusation against him.

**Synod:** [Your disciple Coelestius has been charged with making the following statements:] "Adam was created mortal, and would have died whether he had sinned or not sinned", "that Adam's sin injured only himself and not the human race", "that the law no less than the gospel leads us to the kingdom", "that there were sinless men previous to the coming of Christ", "that new-born infants are in the same condition as Adam was before the fall", [and] "that the whole human race does not, on the one hand, die through Adam's death or transgression, nor, on the other hand, does the whole human race rise again through the resurrection of Christ."

**Pelagius:** Concerning a man's being able indeed to be without sin, we have spoken already; concerning the fact, however, that before the Lord's coming there were persons without sin, we say now that, previous to Christ's advent, some men lived holy and righteous lives, according to the teaching of the sacred Scriptures. The rest were not said by me, as even their testimony goes to show, and for them, I do not feel that I am responsible. But for the satisfaction of the holy synod, I anathematize those who either now hold, or have ever held, these opinions.

**Synod:** With regard to these charges aforesaid, Pelagius has in our presence given us sufficient and proper satisfaction, by anathematizing the opinions which were not his.

**Synod:** [It is reported that you teach] That the Church here is without spot or wrinkle.

**Pelagius:** It has been asserted by me,-- but in such a sense that the Church is by the layer cleansed from every spot and wrinkle, and in this purity the Lord wishes her to continue.

**Synod:** Of this also we approve.

**Synod:** [We would now like to examine certain passages from a book that your disciple Coelestius has written. In the first chapter of his book he has written that] "we do more than is commanded us in the law and the gospel."

**Pelagius:** This they have set down as my statement. What we said, however, was in keeping with the apostle's assertion concerning virginity, of which Paul writes: 'I have no commandment of the Lord.'

**Synod:** This also the Church receives.

**Synod:** [In the third chapter of his book Coelestius has written that] “God's grace and assistance is not given for single actions, but is imparted in the freedom of the will, or in the law and in doctrine...God's grace is given in proportion to our deserts; because, were He to give it to sinful persons, He would seem to be unrighteous...[From these words I infer that] therefore grace itself has been placed in my will, according as I have been either worthy or unworthy of it. For if we do all things by grace, then whenever we are overcome by sin, it is not we who are overcome, but God's grace, which wanted by all means to help us, but was not able...If, when we conquer sin, it is by the grace of God; then it is He who is in fault whenever we are conquered by sin, because He was either altogether unable or unwilling to keep us safe.”

**Pelagius:** Whether these are really the opinions of Coelestius or not, is the concern of those who say that they are. For my own part, indeed, I never entertained such views; on the contrary, I anathematize every one who does entertain them.

**Synod:** This holy synod accepts you for your condemnation of these impious words.

**Synod:** [In the fifth chapter of Coelestius' book it is written that] "every individual has the ability to possess all powers and graces," thus taking away that 'diversity of graces', which the apostle teaches.

**Pelagius:** We have certainly said so much; but yet they have laid against us a malignant and blundering charge. We do not take away the diversity of graces; but we declare that God gives to the person, who has proved himself worthy to receive them, all graces, even as He conferred them on the Apostle Paul.

**Synod:** You accordingly do yourself hold the doctrine of the Church touching the gift of the graces, which are collectively possessed by the apostle.

**Several Bishops:** [Bishop John, what proceedings have taken place before yourself concerning Pelagius previous to this trial?]

**Bishop John:** On the occasion in question (a conference held at Jerusalem at the end of July in the year 415, as described by Orosius in his Apology), when they (others at the Synod) were importunate and exclaimed, 'He is a heretic, because he says, It is true that a man is able, if he only will, to live without sin;' I censured the statement [about being able to live without sin in our own strength], and reminded them besides, that even the Apostle Paul, after so many labours--not indeed in his own strength, but by the grace of God—said, 'I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me;' and again: 'It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy;' and again: 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour but in vain who build it.' And we quoted several other like passages out of the Holy Scriptures. When, however, they did not receive the quotations which we made out of the Holy

Scriptures, but continued their murmuring noise, Pelagius said, 'This is what I also believe; let him be anathema, who declares that a man is able, without God's help, to arrive at the perfection of all virtues.' [John possibly made at this point some negative remarks in reference to Heros and Lazarus (the two deposed bishops who had brought charges up against Pelagius) and Orosius, a Spanish disciple of Augustine who was Augustine's representative at the previous Synod held under Bishop John. Orosius left this Synod prematurely due to conflicts with John. Whatever these statements were-Augustine does not record them-he does note that the other bishops who were present did not feel led to rebuke John over the content of them.]

**Synod:** [In the sixth chapter of Coelestius' work there is laid down this position:] "Men cannot be called sons of God, unless they have become entirely free from all sin." [In the seventh chapter he makes this statement:] "Forgetfulness and ignorance have no connection with sin, as they do not happen through the will, but through necessity;" [In his tenth Chapter he says:] "Our will is free, if it needs the help of God; inasmuch as every one in the possession of his proper will has either something to do or to abstain from doing." [In the twelfth he says:] "Our victory comes not from God's help, but from our own free will." [Coelestius drew this conclusion in the following terms:] "The victory is ours, seeing that we took up arms of our Own will; just as, on the other hand, being conquered is our own, since it was of our own will that we neglected to arm ourselves." ...[Coelestius has noted that in the epistle of the blessed Apostle Peter we read that we might be] "partakers of the divine nature" [and he has made the following argument from this passage:] "Now if our spirit or soul is Unable to be without sin, then even God is subject to sin, since this part of Him, that is to say, the soul, is exposed to sin." [In his thirteenth chapter he says:] "That pardon is not given to penitents according to the grace and mercy of God, but according to their own merits and effort, since through repentance they have been worthy of mercy."

**Synod:** What says the monk Pelagius to all these heads of opinion which have been read in his presence? For this holy synod condemns the whole, as does also God's Holy Catholic Church."

**Pelagius:** I say again, that these opinions, even according to their own testimony, are not mine; nor for them, as I have already said, ought I to be held responsible. The opinions which I have confessed to be my own, I maintain are sound; those, however, which I have said are not my own, I reject according to the judgment of this holy synod, pronouncing anathema on every man who opposes and gainsays the doctrines of the Holy Catholic Church. For I believe in the Trinity of the one substance, and I hold all things in accordance with the teaching of the Holy Catholic Church. If indeed any man entertains opinions different from her, let him be anathema.

**Synod:** Now since we have received satisfaction on the points which have come before us touching the monk Pelagius, who has been present; since, too, he gives his consent to the pious doctrines, and even anathematizes everything that is contrary to the Church's faith, we confess him to belong to the communion of the Catholic Church.

**[At one point Pelagius read private letters from Augustine and others at this trial.]**

*"To my most beloved lord, and most longed-for brother Pelagius, Augustin sends greeting in the Lord. I thank you very much for the pleasure you have kindly afforded me by your letter, and for informing me of your good health. May the Lord requite you with blessings, and may you ever enjoy them, and live With Him for evermore in all eternity, my most beloved lord, and most longed-for brother. For my own part, indeed, although I do not admit your high encomiums of me, which the letter of your Benignity conveys, I yet cannot be insensible of the benevolent view you entertain towards my poor deserts; at the same time requesting you to pray for me, that the Lord would make me such a man as you suppose me to be already." Then, in another hand, it follows: "Be mindful of us; may you be safe, and find favour with the Lord, my most beloved lord, and most longed-for brother."*

*-Augustine to Pelagius, Letter 146*